

A little hope: Linguistically supporting Ukrainian refugees in their transition to host countries

Andrew Wittmaier,

Department of English, Arizona State University, The United States of America

Abstract

The refugee crisis in Ukraine creates a significant number of concerns for nations around the world. One major concern involves how to support the flood of millions of refugees crossing their borders, particularly for neighboring countries. In every case, though refugees need significant support in many areas, learning the language of commerce and communication in their host country often proves essential to success. In this case, Ukrainians bring L1 to this need to learn what is necessary to understand in the cultural context. Ukrainians has undergone both significant oppression (Kazakevych, 2016) and significant revivals (Palko, 2019). In addition, it is continually in competition with Russia seeking dominance in the Ukrainian culture (Bueiko & Moga, 2019). These contexts, as well as others, must be explored to establish safe spaces to learn language for refugees. For creating safe places for Ukrainians to practice dynamic bilingualism, teachers and leaders can improve the sustainability of Ukrainians' lives within their borders. Understanding these cultural and historical contexts may also lead to eased tensions between the natives that their countries are hosting Ukrainians. This paper reviews the research relating to the cultural context of Ukrainian. In reviewing the cultural context, the results indicate that Ukrainians struggle with their historical connections with Russian speakers, in such a way that they are able to speak bilingually in Ukrainian and Russian but do not like to mix these two, and that they are working in multiple ways to create a more "pure" Ukrainian. This research regards all these contexts individually. Then, at the end of the paper, they are explored as they relate directly to the classroom. Recommendations are provided to show how to support and utilize these cultural contexts as countries around the world prepare to receive Ukrainian refugees and teach them their languages of commerce and communication.

1. Introduction

Refugees around the world face several similar struggles. Though many relate to adapting to a new country in the face of trauma, one struggle for most refugees is learning their host country's primary language. Even if some refugees know a certain amount of that language, as is often the case with English-speaking host countries, a lot of linguistic nuances must be learned to thrive in a country with a different dominant language. Additionally, significant number of refugees have professional experience in challenging fields but cannot enter those fields in their host countries because of the specialized vocabulary necessary. Thus, learning language not only enables refugees to survive in a new place, but it also allows them to thrive in their new situations. Learning the language is vitally important for refugees.

Many refugees face difficulties when it comes to learning the language of the country they enter. For instance, it is expected that they speak the primary language and if they do not, they are often treated with frustration. There is a real danger that language learning, provided in a subtractive sense, will create a culture that makes their first language seem, at best, unimportant. This presents a significant problem for many refugees, as their language is often one of the few things that connects them back to their culture. Though the primary language must be taught, refugees' L1 must also be supported through that teaching. Creating this mindset of dynamic bilingualism assists refugees and others alike, as it not only provides a safe space for refugees' initial languages to be retained and developed, but it also enriches the global landscape of the host country, providing a deep encounter with another language and culture.

Currently (early 2022), the world is watching the military conflict in Ukraine. This crisis is creating millions of refugees who are seeking protection in other countries. As this influx of refugees begins, it will be important for language teachers around the world to support Ukrainian learners as they try to learn dominant languages in each of these countries. This is especially important for Ukrainians, as Ukrainians have undergone a lot of different stages of suffering and confusion throughout their language's history. Understanding the cultural and historical context of Ukrainian's development, particularly its interactions with other languages, will help all teachers better support learning in a manner that does not continue to repress Ukrainian or make it unimportant, but develop a dynamic bilingualism that supports both languages.

Though multiple cultural factors impacting Ukrainian could be addressed, three essential factors will be identified for the purpose of this paper. First, even in the pre-Soviet era, Ukrainian has not been given a status as a full language by Russian speakers. Often, it was and is seen as "little Russian" (Kazakevych, 2016, p. 7). Second, Ukrainian has gone through multiple revivals (Palko, 2019), and is currently being revived with varying levels of success (Bureiko & Moga, 2019, p. 18). Finally, in a blending of the previous two, Ukrainian's use of Russian phrases and loanwords has created a complicated understanding for Ukrainians of what it means to speak "pure" Ukrainian. In this paper, the method of research will be discussed initially. Then, the three contexts will be discussed in detail. Finally, these contexts will be applied to recommendations for teachers regarding how utilize these contexts well.

2. Method

This research was conducted through literature review. The literature was selected through a broad search for "Ukrainian" and "Language" which was then narrowed. The focus centered on research on Ukrainian's cultural and linguistic interactions. Most of the research focused on Ukrainian and English or Russian, however, there a couple of articles focused on Ukrainian and Polish or Estonian as well. These provided a snapshot of the ways Ukrainian is has been impacted in the past and present through these interactions. Through this snapshot, the reality of the cultural context of Ukrainian's development as a language can begin to be understood. As one understands this context, one can see how Ukrainian learners can best be supported as they transition to other countries and contexts.

3. Analysis: Three Main Ideas

This research presents diverse perspectives regarding Ukrainian and its use on a national and global scale. Myckhalchuk and Bihunova (2019) elaborated on the different uses of Ukrainian and English idioms, highlighting the overlap between the two. Buričko & Moga (2019) developed on the theory that it is possible the Ukrainian consciousness is more centered in civics than in linguistics (p. 7). And Yekimov et. al. (2021) concentrated on the fact that learning using Ukrainians' own folklore will help improve language learning for Ukrainians. Each of these developments is not only a valuable contribution to Ukrainian studies, it also has bearing on the present discussion regarding the cultural and historical context of Ukrainian.

Though each of these discussions do have unique weight on their own, they all tangentially relate to the discussions that this paper will focus on. For instance, the uses of Ukrainian and English idioms connect to the theme of "pure" Ukrainian, and how it can be practiced in the modern, global sphere. English has had some impact on Ukrainian, and it is important to recognize that impact as part of the context of learners' desires for their own distinct language. Thus, the discussion of the use of English idioms in Ukrainian must be part of the discussion on the impact of other languages on Ukrainian. All other discussions similarly connect to the main discussions as well.

The three main discussions of this paper were chosen specifically because they emerged as common themes throughout the research surveyed. Each article, though it may focus on a specific topic, impacted at least one of the main discussions. Thus, these discussions were threads that could be followed throughout the research. They are important, foundational discussions that can be elaborated in the future. Future research will indeed be necessary to fully understand each of the surrounding discussions that connect to the major discussions outlined in this paper.

4. Context 1: Understanding the Historical Context of Ukrainian

Ukrainian has been treated various ways by those in charge of Ukraine. Though portions of Ukraine were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the early 20th century, much of the research relates directly to the actions of the Russian Empire, Soviet Union and Free Ukraine. Each of these “rulers” of Ukraine had a different outlook on the Ukrainian language during their era. These eras all had a distinct impact on the Ukrainian’s cultural context.

During the time of the Russian Empire, Ukrainian was treated negatively. First, Ukrainian, to many Russian elites, belonged to the rural spaces, a language of “country folk” (Kazakevych, 2016, p. 214). Additionally, any Ukrainian that moved beyond the rural sphere verged on threatening the stability of the empire (Kazakevych, 2016, p. 218). Thus, Ukrainian, or “Little Russian” as it was well-known, was treated negatively by those in power. Ukrainians underwent a process of “assimilation” through their schools and culture that elevated Russian as the dominant language and the language of prestige in Russian society (Kazakevych, 2016). The legacy of this oppression continues today. Ukrainian students may react poorly to second language teaching that strongly prioritizes the L2, as it could create a sense where the L2 is provided as a replacement for Ukrainian. The repressive actions against Ukrainian ultimately changed with the waning of the Russian Empire in the early twentieth century.

After the rise of the Soviet Union, policy toward Ukrainian shifted drastically. Since the Soviet Union was built on a principle of equality of all things, Ukrainian was provided a space to develop. However, this decision was not purely benevolent as Ukrainian was not only supported by the Soviet Union, but became a vehicle push the Soviet ideological mindset into the hearts and minds of Ukrainians (Palko, 2019). This created an abusive situation with the language, as the language was being manipulated to develop these Soviet ideals. This manipulation also continues to impact learners, as learners may be keenly aware of underlying lessons being taught with the language and may react poorly to any teaching method that may have an underlying agenda. For instance, they may be wary of learning about the United States citizenship exam while learning English, because they may sense a different agenda than simply teaching the language in these lessons.

When Ukraine eventually did become a sovereign nation the ideals of the Soviet Union and Russian Empire left scars on the linguistic landscape. Though Ukrainian was seen as a useful language, there was a dichotomy created within the minds of the people. Many people in Ukraine do not see Russian as a foreign language, but rather part of Ukrainian identity, even going to the point where Russian-speaking Ukrainians feel qualified to evaluate Ukrainian, a language they do not speak (Kuluk, 2011, p. 12). Due to this, many Ukrainians may be very sensitive to how their language is treated by those who do not speak it. Others in Ukraine desire to purge Russian from their collective linguistic consciousness to become more fully “Ukrainian”. This difficult dyad continues to impact Ukraine and its people’s cultural connection to their language today.

5. Context B: Reviving Ukrainian through Bilingual Instruction

Since Ukrainian has been given the space to flourish in recent decades, there have been many efforts to strengthen and revitalize Ukrainian on national scale. Many support the ideal of Ukrainian becoming a more-frequently-used language, but this mindset creates many issues. For one, many Russian-speaking Ukrainians state they will speak Russian because they are not skilled at speaking Ukrainian (Kulyk, 2011, p. 79). This raises questions of how Ukrainian could logically become a national language. Another issue that has occurred is the long-standing belief that acceptance of Russian and its influence on Ukrainian is a more enlightened mindset than exclusive use of Ukrainian (Harrison, 2021, p. 10). This sentiment towards Russian is both prevalent and divisive among those who are working to revitalize Ukrainian.

Many revitalization efforts do not attempt to completely rid the country of Russian but focus on bilingualism. In the minds of these teachers Russian, though a source of strain for many people, cannot completely be eliminated from use in Ukraine. Kulyk's (2011) research indicates that most people see Russian as a "not quite foreign" language that must be supported in Ukraine (p. 85). Thus, a system of bilingualism has been developed to support both needs. Friedman (2009) observed that in a Ukrainian classroom, bilingualism was celebrated, but mixing was not tolerated (p. 354). Thus, Ukrainian was supported as an individual language distinct from, and unmixed with, Russian, and Russian was still accepted within the public space as well. This is consistent with other research that indicates while mixing is not acceptable (Flier, 2007, p. 4) many Ukrainians operate in "non-accommodating bilingualism", where each language is mutually understood. Thus, everyone uses the language most comfortable to them, but still can be understood (Warner, 2014, p. 431). This may mean Ukrainian students who are learning a new language may be most comfortable speaking using a non-accommodating bilingualism or using the language they are most comfortable with. As they learn a new language, they may continue to access their linguistic knowledge with these bilingual goals in mind, and certainly can be taught using methods that connect to their natural inclinations toward language use. While Ukrainian is being developed, many are still accepting Russian in their every-day lives.

Ukrainian's development shows strength on a more global scale as well. For instance, in neighboring Poland, Ukrainian has become an important mode of communication. Levchuk (2021) conducted research on Ukrainian speakers in Poland, noting that Ukrainian is second in use only to global English in Polish society (p. 10). It is so prevalent that many of the signs in Poland are written in both Polish and Ukrainian (Levchuk, 2021, p. 4). This reveals the strength of Ukrainian as a global language. Its speakers are not only willing to work to revitalize it within national borders, but those who speak it outside the country also work to maintain their language. Their language has been maintained so well that it is extremely prevalent in Poland, even more so than certain European Union languages. Thus, many Ukrainian learners and immigrants will continue to grip to their language and use it whenever they can. Even as they learn new languages, there is a strong sense of maintaining Ukrainian as an important form of communication. And, as Ukrainian continues to grow as the language of an independent state, there will most likely be more places where Ukrainian use will be prevalent enough to impact the culture and infrastructure.

6. Context 3: Empowering "Pure" Ukrainian

Within Ukraine, there is also a movement towards strengthening Ukrainian occurring. As noted above, there is a continual struggle produced by the Russian-Ukrainian Dyad. Many Ukrainians feel frustrated with Russian impacting their language and actively work to "purify" Ukrainian from all Russian influences. As one might imagine, there is strong Russian influence on Ukrainian, so this work is a large and arduous undertaking.

One of the most obvious examples of purifying Ukrainian is many Ukrainians' reaction to Surzhyk, a Ukrainian-Russian mixture. Many people view Surzhyk as a form of sub-standard Ukrainian (Flier, 2007, p. 17). It is more widely looked down upon and is often not acceptable in the public space. Most Ukrainians would prefer the use of Ukrainian, or even Russian. Avoidance of Surzhyk does help Ukrainians keep Ukrainian free of some Russian influences, but there are still many that impact non-Surzhyk Ukrainian as well. This indicates that some Ukrainians may be uncomfortable mixing their language with languages other than Russian as well. As they learn another language in their host country, they may be more uncomfortable using it blended with Ukrainian, like Surzhyk, and may try to keep each language separate as much as possible.

While it is true that Ukrainians oppose the use of Surzhyk, Ukrainians also have an increasing resistance to any Russian loanwords in Ukrainian. In a study done by Friedman (2009) a Ukrainian classroom was observed, where there was clear preference for Ukrainian forms of words, even where most Ukrainian speakers have an option of a traditional Ukrainian word or a Russian loanword. This signals very clearly to the students that Ukrainian should be used, and Russian should be avoided. However, it is also important to note that the teacher viewed Russian loanwords as non-intentional errors and corrected them as such (p. 364). Additionally, in a different study on language policy in Ukraine, Chanyinska, Kende, and Wohl (2021) observed a belief among some Ukrainians that linguisticide had occurred by the Russians throughout Ukraine's history, and a monolingual policy is the best way to avoid the further influence of Russian (p. 11). This even goes so far as to indicate that there are Ukrainians believe in bilingual exceptions for schools who want to teach an EU language, but not for those that wish to teach Russian. This indicates a final trend in "purifying" Ukrainian that is worth mentioning.

While they are wary of Russian influences, many Ukrainian speakers react better to languages of the European Union, as well as English, being taught in conjunction with Ukrainian, without concern of the impact on their language. Goodman (2019) guesses that languages like English are often linked with "European-ness" and thus are more acceptable to Ukrainians (p. 5). While again this may be understandable, there is still a real danger for Ukrainians in accepting European languages. These languages are often dominating and do create huge impact on the language. Polkovosky warned in 2006 that there was a danger of too many English borrowings entering Ukrainian unnecessarily (p. 487). While Ukrainians are more open to languages like English entering their language, it is important to recognize that there are valuable efforts by many being made to sustain Ukrainian as a unique language, as outlined above. This may indicate that though many Ukrainians are wary of Russian influences, some Ukrainians may actually be more willing to allow other languages to influence Ukrainian. Thus, in class, some may be more accepting of languages like English and more willing to use them freely. While this is not inherently a bad thing, it is important to remember the work being done to create a strong Ukrainian language and support Ukrainians by not allowing any language to take over their language. Avoiding excessive loanwords from any language could be a key factor in continuing this work.

7. Recommendations

As Ukrainians enter different countries and begin to set up their lives, they will need to learn the language of those countries. Many Ukrainians enter these countries in a state of fear and loss and must be supported through that fear and loss in every way possible. The research reviewed provided an understanding of the different cultural contexts that Ukrainians may carry with their language. These contexts, particularly the three main contexts discussed, must be kept in mind as countries begin to teach Ukrainians the dominant language, as supporting the cultural context of language supports these learners and avoids furthering their suffering.

First, teachers must remember that Ukrainian has been treated poorly in the past by different countries, particularly the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Learners may be acutely aware of lessons which downplay the importance of their native language. They are used to those who are in charge seeing their language as “little Russian” and may react poorly to Ukrainian being looked down upon. Though this is not something most countries would purposefully do, many cultures with a monolingual ideology consistently implement an understanding of learners’ L1 that does diminish its importance. Teachers in these countries in particular must avoid falling into that ideology.

Many learners may be aware of the use of Ukrainian to promote ideologies of the country. The Soviet Union revitalized Ukrainian to teach the ideologies of the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, this may connect too closely to the lessons of many teachers who are teaching in a bilingual classroom. There may be many ways to use Ukrainian to help learners become more comfortable with the culture and language of the host country. While this may not be a problem, some Ukrainians could become frustrated with the use of their language, or any language learning, to instill ideas of another country. Once again, teachers often would not have insidious motives, but must be careful about the implications of the way that they teach, particularly for Ukrainians.

As teachers begin to develop their students’ proficiency in their second language, teachers would do well to remember how Ukrainian is taught in Ukraine. Bilingualism is important for Ukrainians, but a mixed Ukrainian is unacceptable for many learners. This may only be the case when Ukrainian is mixed with Russian, but it may have implications for other languages as well. More study is recommended to fully understand these reactions, but teacher would do well to be cautious of mixing languages in case that does prove uncomfortable for students. Teachers must also remember the frequent use of unaccommodating bilingualism among Ukrainians. Though exchanges where students communicate in different languages may seem unnatural, even unhelpful, to teachers, teachers must remember that it is normal for Ukrainian interactions. Stopping that practice may lead to more clunky and confused speech, as the learners will feel less comfortable with an unnaturally forced method of communication. Though there are times when they must speak the language of the host country to learn, many Ukrainians will most likely continue to use their mother tongue when interacting with those who understand it. This is perfectly acceptable, especially for Ukrainians who are proficient but have a preference towards their home language. Truthfully, this use of language should be celebrated in the classroom.

Finally, Ukrainians’ desire for a “pure” Ukrainian should be supported in the classrooms as well. One way this can manifest involves allowing Ukrainians to use their language as a support tool to learn. One must be being cautious about using Russian as a replacement. While Russian is a more widely spoken language, and thus teachers may have a better exposure to Russian, it may be problematic to use with students. While there would certainly be the temptation to use Russian to benefit communication, this may also create a situation where the “pure” Ukrainian desired is undermined by the strength of Russian use in the classroom, especially since there are so many “Russianisms” in Ukrainian already. This is not the only scenario, however, and Russian may be able to be utilized effectively. Teachers must always be careful that Ukrainians’ desire for their own unique language is recognized and supported, otherwise students may react poorly to the lessons.

Because Ukrainians’ desire for a unique language is so important culturally, teachers must also be careful to support Ukrainian through the impact of the host culture’s language. While it is natural that the host language impacts Ukrainian, teachers must be careful not to overemphasize the host language to the point where Ukrainian is overtaken. English especially has been a concern for Ukrainians in the past, and with Ukrainians coming into English-speaking countries, teachers must strive to support the goal of non-excessive

borrowing to preserve the uniqueness of the language. Teachers will certainly find that Ukrainian is a unique language which should continue to have standing as a valuable and important way of communication alongside the host language.

8. Conclusion

As Ukrainians leave their home and go to other places around the world, more considerations regarding language learning in new contexts will certainly develop. This research poses multiple questions still to be answered which are important to keep in mind. Ukrainians have a long story for their language full of hurt and triumph. Now, as they enter other nations and communities in a season of hurt, these nations and communities must work to understand and engage well with Ukrainian learners of the host language. This is vital for the preservation of Ukrainian as a unique language in different contexts. It is also vital for the well-being and healthy adjustment of Ukrainian learners to their new situation. By understanding the historical control, the bilingual revitalization efforts, and the movement towards “pure” Ukrainian, teachers will be able to provide safer spaces for their learners. Their learners’ success and longevity will be positively impacted. Thus, understanding the cultural context of the language will bring a small bit of hope to Ukrainians as they struggle with the chaos currently dominating their own country.

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